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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 000413

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/25/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [AF](#)

SUBJECT: VICE PRESIDENTS AND PARLIAMENT LEADERS HOLD FIRM
TO CARETAKER GOVERNMENT WITHOUT KARZAI

REF: A. 2/25 HOLBROOKE-DELL PHONE CALL
[1](#)B. KABUL 396

Classified By: Charge Christopher Dell, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (S/NF) SUMMARY. In 2/25 meetings with the Charge, the two vice presidents and the speakers of each house of Parliament welcomed U.S. efforts to assist the country to reach a consensus on post-5/22 executive authority, but most held firm to their insistence that President Karzai step down in favor of a caretaker government. All leaders accept the 8/20 election date and would oppose any effort by Karzai to move the date forward. However, nearly all expressed concerns that Karzai would manipulate government resources to benefit his campaign if he remained in office. They insisted he had to resign in favor of a caretaker government after 5/22 if he wished to run for re-election. Some of them, however, would consider an arrangement in which Karzai remained in office after 5/22 while running for re-election, but under the condition that he accepted voluntary limitations on his power.

U.S. Position

[1](#)2. (S/NF) In his 2/25 meetings, Charge explained to each of the four political leaders the U.S. position on elections and transitional authority (ref A): the Afghan political establishment must preserve the 8/20 presidential election date and that while Karzai's mandate ends on 5/22, we believe he and the bulk of his government should assume caretaker status until August elections. In the U.S. view, it was imperative to maintain a strong central government during the peak Taliban fighting season over the summer months. The United States recognized Karzai's executive authority expired on 5/22. The most logical option would be for Karzai to step down on 5/22, and then assume a position as caretaker president until the inauguration. During that period, he could exercise some diminished level of authority, the exact limitations of which the Palace and opposition groups would have to decide. This diminished authority would address the suspicions of the opposition that Karzai would use the power of incumbency to influence the outcome of the election. The international community could serve as an oversight body over Karzai's actions in this capacity. The U.S. urged all Afghans to negotiate with the best interests of the country, not themselves, in mind. The end result should be a free, fair, open, and transparent election on 8/20.

Vice Presidents

[1](#)3. (S/NF) First Vice President Massoud reiterated his support for the 8/20 election date, but also his opposition to Karzai staying in office after 5/22 (ref B). He contended that an interim president, but not Karzai, was the best solution. Sometimes it was necessary to violate the Constitution in the interests of the country; a May election would clearly not be fair, open, or transparent. He called

on the U.S. to lead on determining a way forward.

14. (S/NF) Second Vice President Khalili suggested the United States, UN and other members of the international community (unspecified) should bring together leaders from the executive, legislative and judicial branches to devise a consensus solution to the presidential continuity dilemma. On the election date, Khalili agreed an election before 8/20 was not possible for security and logistical reasons, but remained concerned about violating the constitutional requirement to hold the election before May.

Parliamentary Leaders

15. (S/NF) Upper House Speaker Mojaddedi said the Upper House had long supported the Independent Election Commission's rationale for an 8/20 election. He pledged that the Upper House would issue a statement supporting the election date, to balance efforts by the Lower House to challenge the IEC's actions. Mojaddedi, who has privately expressed some interest in revisiting his role as a caretaker leader, was more ambiguous on the issue of post-5/22 presidential continuity. Various politicians, legal scholars, and lawyers have suggested he serve as caretaker president -- an option he told the Charge he has not ruled out completely, but that "God has taken all love of power from my heart." Mojaddedi believed his close history with Karzai colored his chances of being seen as an impartial moderator in talks with opposition parties to reach a consensus solution.

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16. (S/NF) Lower House Speaker Qanooni doubted limitations to Karzai's post-5/22 authority would appease critics, including him, who thought Karzai would unfairly exploit government resources during the campaign. Governors, district administrators, and police chiefs loyal to the president were already in place and ready to influence voting in Karzai's favor; limiting future appointments would not address this concern. Qanooni appreciated the U.S. commitment to a free, fair, open, and transparent election and welcomed our participation in discussions on how to address presidential continuity. Qanooni insisted a transitional mechanism that replaced Karzai as head of state was absolutely necessary, but said he would consider the Charge's suggestion to consider limitations on Karzai's authority while serving in a caretaker capacity as part of an overall compromise.

DELL